

Art McPhee

*The Kingdom Life and the Witness of the Church*

**Abstract**

This paper was presented in Asbury Theological Seminary, on October 9, 2015 at the Advanced Research Program's Interdisciplinary Colloquium on the subject, *The Church and Its Expansion*. This paper explores the role of the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching and its potential impact on the Church for the work of evangelism and church planting. As a central theme of Jesus, it becomes a metaphor and a model for how the Church should be involved in ministry to the world around us.

**Keywords:** Mission, Kingdom of God, Great Commission, Church Planting

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## Introduction

In the days of Jesus, Palestine was a place of acute political and social unrest. On the one hand, there was great dissatisfaction with Roman control and restrictions. On the other hand, even a whiff of public dissent brought more brutal bans and restrictions. Add to that vicious cycle the rising, hope-against-hope expectation among Jews that God must be getting ready to intervene with the sending of the long-awaited Messiah and the inauguration of his everlasting kingdom, and you have an even more volatile mix.

Some Jews, later called Zealots, were anxious to stir the potion and bring it to a boil. Although they were not yet a cohesive group, bands of them conducted hit-and-run attacks against rich Roman officials, tax collectors, and informants. Some think Judas Iscariot and Simon the Zealot, named together in Matthew 10:4, may have had such empathized with zealot leanings.<sup>1</sup>

Other Jews, including some of the Pharisees execrated Roman rule behind closed doors but feared public demonstrations that might arouse the fears or ire of the Romans. One thinks, for example, of the emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin after the commotion caused by the raising of Lazarus by Jesus. “If we let him go on like this,” they fretted, “the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” John tells us they resolved, therefore, to set a plot to kill Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

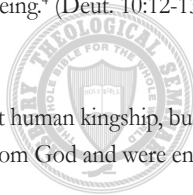
## The Kingdom of God

Where did the early first-century buzz about the inauguration of God’s kingdom come from? The origin of kingly language for God first came to the fore when Israel got established in Canaan. Other nations had earthly kings, but Israel’s king would be God. So, for example, when the Israelites wanted Gideon to rule over them, he refused, declaring, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you. *The Lord will rule over you.*”<sup>3</sup> Thus, as other nations served human kings, Israel’s duty was to serve God alone, and to obey God’s teaching.

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.<sup>4</sup> (Deut. 10:12-13)

### *Kings in Service to God*

In time, Israel did accept human kingship, but with a difference. Israel’s kings received their appointments from God and were enthroned as servants to God. We



are told the Lord chose Solomon, for example, to sit on the throne over Israel, but the throne was not his throne, it was “the throne of the kingdom of the Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

If Israel’s kings forgot or forsook their obligation, it was the responsibility of the prophets to remind them of their servant role to God. And, alas, most of them were hard of hearing or forgetful. Thus, in due time the Davidic dynasty collapsed and with it the nation. To paraphrase Jeremiah, “The shepherds were stupid, and did not inquire of the Lord; so they lost their land and their sheep.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Two Visions of God’s New Kingdom*

By Jesus’ day, an expanded vision had emerged of a coming kingdom for Israel. This was met with great interest by Jews chafing under the degrading humiliation of Roman rule. God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah contained faint hints of this event.

I will make you [Abraham] exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. . . . I will bless her [Sarah], and moreover I will give you a son by her. . . and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.<sup>7</sup>

But later writings were sparking serious study, speculation and a swelling suspicion that God was getting ready to act. For example, in the Qumran community, where the Dead Sea Scrolls, were found, the Book of Daniel was having great appeal due to two stories that pointed to the decisive and lasting victory of a coming kingdom of God over the autocratic and arbitrary authority of all beastly oppressors including, quite clearly, Rome itself. Both stories were about dreams, one of them a dream of Daniel, an exile in Babylon. The other was a dream of Babylon’s King, Nebuchadnezzar, which Daniel, with God’s help, was able to recite and interpret.

Nebuchadnezzar’s dream vexed him visibly. It consisted of two images. The first was a great statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, and legs and feet of iron (iron mixed with clay in its feet). Daniel told the king that the statue represented a succession of world kingdoms beginning with Babylon itself.<sup>8</sup> But there was a second part to the dream, about which Daniel said the following:

While you were watching, a rock was cut out [of a mountain], but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace.

But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.<sup>9</sup>

The rock, it turned out, represented a fifth but very different kingdom, upon which Daniel elaborated as follows:

In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy.<sup>10</sup>

Daniel's own dream turns up in the seventh chapter. It, too, describes four kingdoms, represented this time by four beasts rising from the sea—beasts that, again, were to be replaced by an everlasting kingdom of God, ruled by “one like a son of man.”<sup>11</sup>

### Characteristics of the Coming Kingdom

The two dreams added substance to the concept of the coming kingdom of God. The details remained a matter of conjecture, but its attributes were coming into focus.

*1. It Would Be a Supernatural Kingdom.* That is what Daniel affirmed when he described it as cut from the mountain, “but not by human not by hands.” The kingdom was of divine, not human origin.

The early church father, John Chrysostom of Constantinople thought this might be a reference to the virgin birth. Whether he was right or not, this much is clear: this kingdom represented by the rock has a different starting place than all the others. It is not the result of human conquest, or human intrigue, or human anything. It is all of God. God taking the initiative. God stepping into history.

*2. It Would Be a Singular Kingdom.* Daniel also intimated God's kingdom would be unlike any other. It not only would have a different beginning but a different character.

The rock representing the kingdom, like other rocks in the Bible, is a symbol of strength and power. But it is not the same tyrannical, terrorizing power used by Rome and the other powers represented in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. It is the one

kingdom not associated with the statue in the dream. It is separate, solitary, singular, unique. It is not anything like these other kingdoms. How's that? Consider, for example, what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount about loving enemies, turning the other cheek, taking the log out of your own eye before judging, doing to others as you would have them do to you, doing nothing for effect, not taking oaths, not taking revenge, and the like.

3. *It Would Be a Secure Kingdom.* "It will never be destroyed," said Daniel.

After a while, the rise of earthly kingdoms ends and their demise ensues. It happens to them all. The Romans must have thought that Jesus' kingdom was hammered shut like a coffin when they drove their spikes into the cross. But, on the third day, *their* rock was rolled aside. And it was clear that a new kingdom was emerging, one that as Daniel foretold would never be destroyed.

4. *It Would Be a Spreading Kingdom.* In Jesus' description, the kingdom of God starts very small—like a mustard seed. But it doesn't stay that way. In Daniel's words, "the rock that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth." Other images—for instance, the yeast in the loaf—convey the same idea. The kingdom of God will eventually encompass all the nations and the whole of creation. Indeed, its scope will include "the renewal of all things."<sup>12</sup>

5. *It Would Be a Sure Kingdom.* Again, in Daniel's words, "In the days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people."

In other words, ultimately, this is the only kingdom that can everlastingly be depended on. It is the only one worth seeking, the only one worth one's allegiance, the only one that will not never fail. Like the loves of Scarlett O'Hara, eventually everything else will be gone with the wind: "and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace could be found."<sup>13</sup> Only God's kingdom is eternal; even the stars are not. No doubt, that is what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote of the kingdom that "cannot be moved."<sup>14</sup>

6. *It Would Be a Sovereign Kingdom.* From the Daniel 7 dream, we see the kingdom is under the supreme authority of one like a Son of Man—that is, Jesus! When, after John's arrest, Jesus came to Galilee saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near,"<sup>15</sup> ears must have perked up. Was Jesus the one who would launch God's kingdom in its fullness? Was he the promised Messiah? Although many were looking for the coming King and kingdom, their views of how

it would transpire and what it would look like were all over the map. For example, most people presumed its arrival would come by conquest. However, Jesus' life, death and resurrection would reveal a new reality.

## Jesus and the Kingdom of God

### *The Kingdom as the Persistent Focus of Jesus' Preaching*

From the start, Jesus' preaching featured the kingdom of God, just as John the Baptist's had. After John's arrest, he made his home in Capernaum and "from that time," says Matthew, "Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"<sup>16</sup> Matthew adds that Jesus went all over Galilee, "teaching in the synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, his message was popular. Everywhere he went, great crowds came to hear him: from the province of Syria, the towns of the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.<sup>18</sup>

The nearness of the kingdom was also the message with which he sent his disciples: he "went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve--designating them apostles--that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach." And when he sent them out, the message they were to proclaim remained constant. He told them, "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment."<sup>19</sup>

Jesus sending was consistent in a second way. Those he sent were not only to proclaim the kingdom with words but were meant themselves to be the message. Their words and deeds were to work together, each confirming the other, both of one cloth. His pattern was purposeful and persistent. When he subsequently sent ahead of him a group of seventy, he did so with the same instructions he gave the Twelve: "Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"

The nearness of the kingdom was to be seen in the presence of Jesus himself. It was evident in his healing ministry, including his exorcisms. Peter was struck by it on the Mount of the Transfiguration. "We were eyewitnesses," he wrote. Eyewitnesses of what? "Of his majesty!"<sup>20</sup> The aura in Jesus' eyes, the lightning brightness of his garments, the glorious colloquy with Moses and Elijah on his departure (his exodus), and the astonishing attestation from heaven—the glory of that occasion—and the kingly figure at its center immediately before him remained with Peter for the rest of his life.

That, however, was the preview. With Jesus' resurrection would come the inauguration of his kingdom—on earth. That is what he had taught them to pray for: “your kingdom come, on earth.” Easter is not about going to heaven. Easter is about the inauguration of the kingdom, new creation, the renewal of all things, on earth.

### *The Work of the Church*

What does that mean for us? It means, as his disciples in the church, we have work to do—kingdom work, not church work, for Jesus came preaching the kingdom, not the church! There is much confusion these days between church work and the work of the church. Church work focuses on the church. However, the work of the church is all about the kingdom. It is about announcing salvation and shalom not for individuals alone but for all creation. The focus on people is at the heart of God's program, but it is not the whole of it. Our redemption is a key consequence of Jesus death, resurrection, and ascension, and a vitally important one, but isolating it as we have so often done can hijack the larger glory and majesty of King Jesus and his kingdom.

### *The Great Commission*

Both Matthew and Acts limit their descriptions of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his disciples to one matter: The Great Commission.

In Acts, the disciples ask, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” But, to their surprise certainly, he answers their expectation with a task: “It is not for you to know... but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>20</sup>

The unavoidable inference is that witnessing has a direct connection to the fulfillment of the disciples' expectation. I have wondered, in fact, if, perhaps, in that moment, Jesus' earlier words came flooding back to them: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come!”<sup>21</sup>

That is not to say our witness brings about the fulfillment. I saw a church billboard once that boasted, “Building the kingdom for the last 28 years!” Erroneous statements like that are common in the church. Why don't we know better? We don't build the kingdom, God establishes and grows his kingdom. When Paul wrote, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God gave the growth,” he was, in essence saying, “We don't do much; we're just a couple of farmers.” And that's right!

Nevertheless, the post-resurrection, post-Pentecost witness of the church to the nations concerning Jesus' death resurrection, and ascension, and its proclamation of his kingship and kingdom matter, because the fulfillment of God's ultimate purpose is connected to that witness.

Matthew's only post-resurrection account of Jesus and the eleven disciples takes place on a mountaintop in Galilee, to which he had instructed them to go. Some have guessed it was Mount Tabor, where the Transfiguration may also have taken place. From there, the disciples could survey the eastern part of the Jezreel Valley in one direction and the Sea of Galilee in another. The background certainly heightened the experience of standing before the risen Lord Jesus and hearing him say, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."<sup>22</sup> Sometimes, we focus so much on the instructions Jesus gave in the Great Commission, we forget this first part is the most crucial part of the pericope. The Jesus standing before the disciples had, just days before, been dead in a tomb. Now here he was, alive, the conqueror of death and all the powers of hell! The nearness of the kingdom was, at the moment, the nowness of the kingdom— "all authority!"

What that setting and statement make clear is that the central message of the church is to be about Jesus. As Paul wrote to the church at Philippi and repeatedly affirmed:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>23</sup>

That is what the apostles preached: Jesus alive!

In consequence, the disciples were to make disciples just as he had made disciples of them. That is the one imperative in the Great Commission. Going into all the world, as the disciples inevitably would in light of the stunning revelation of Christ alive, they were to "make disciples of all peoples."

Notice, that Jesus says nothing about individuals, nothing about the psychology of conversion, nothing about the inward, spiritual formation of the person. That does not mean those are not important or are left out, but the vision is larger. But, again, I want to emphasize the gospel is grander than that. Beyond that good news, the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ were the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that his progeny would be a blessing to the nations. It was the ultimate affirmation of a fact accented repeatedly in the psalms and elsewhere: The



Creator God is not the God of Israel alone but of all of his creation, including every nation.

In Matthew, the command to make disciples incorporates three particples, which because of their attachment to the imperative verb have an imperative sense too. Nevertheless, the main command is not the going, baptizing, or teaching, but “make disciples.” For that reason, one wonders about translating “going therefore” as an imperative—as “Go!” Because it is also the first word, the impression left in English translations that there are two commands and that the first one is the main one. In other words, “Go, therefore...” stated at the beginning gives the impression the main thrust is to go! But that is not the main thrust, and “Go” instead of “going,” or “as you are going,” detracts from the force and primacy of the main thrust: to make disciples. Having seen the resurrected Lord, the awe-struck disciples were not about to stay in hiding. They were going! Can anyone imagine for a scintilla of a second they were going to keep quiet about what they had seen?

The reason for the emphasis on making disciples is that the kingdom life is a life of following and imitating Jesus. Far too often, the church has focused on something less than that: on decisions for Christ, or on church attendees, members, and converts. That is probably because we live in the age of measuring success by the numbers, and attendees, members, and converts are easy to count. But those are not the real measure of a church. Why not? Well, to use an illustration from the mountainous part of the country I grew up in, when we focus on those categories, we end up bringing people to the trailhead without helping them get on the trail! The two appositives, “baptizing” and “teaching,” emphasize (1) the immediate expectation of a public expression of commitment on the part of a new believer, and (2) the additional expectation of holding to Jesus’ teaching. A decision represents something less than that. Church attendance represents something less than that. In light of those two components of disciple making, it is difficult to sustain the argument, as so many do, that Jesus is satisfied with a verbal or cognitive yes. Even if we mean it, but we fail to follow through by giving Jesus our allegiance and obedience every day of every week, it is not enough. Jesus’ call is not a call to decide but to follow. It is more than the call of a teacher; it is the call of the risen Lord—the call of a king!

### *Discipleship and Following*

Jesus, in fact, never said to anyone, “Come be my disciple.” He said, instead, “follow me.” In fact, “follow” and “following”—always in verb form—occur some 80 times in the gospels. Etymologically, a disciple was a student, a learner. But Jesus was not interested in merely filling his disciples’ heads with knowledge. Rather, he

expected them to do what he did: heal the sick, deliver the oppressed, and proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God. Jesus was not just another teacher of the Tora. His disciples did not go to Rabbi Jesus' house with their credentials to enlist for Bible study. Instead, he conscripted them for service! "You did not choose me," he reminded them. "I chose you."

Jesus' authority was also apparent in his teaching as well as his call. His interpretation of the Mosaic and oral Torahs was not like that of a Hillel, or Shammai, or Gamaliel, or any other rabbi of his time. When Jesus entered the synagogue at Capernaum, everybody sat up. All of them were astounded at his teaching. Why? "Because he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Mark says, "they were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority!'" And because, in addition to what he said, Jesus delivered a man with an unclean spirit, the people in the synagogue were doubly astonished: "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."<sup>24</sup>

Mark's gospel does not tell us what Jesus taught, although his pattern was to use Galilean synagogues as a platform for declaring his message of the kingdom. Stylistically, his pedagogy had much in common with that of traditional teachers of the law. He used rabbinic stories, everyday metaphors, and familiar patterns of reasoning. There was nothing different there. In giving his Sermon on the Mount, however, heard by listeners who responded with the same astonishment and commentary as his Capernaum synagogue hearers, we see something different. Six times Jesus asserts, "You've heard it was said... but I say to you."<sup>25</sup> That was diametrically different from the pattern of traditional rabbis who worked the margins with the minimum for minuscule moderations in their elucidations of the Torah. Again and again, Jesus went beyond the letter of the Law to the spirit of the Law and, indeed, to the essence of the Father's will.

That said, there is something more to add. Jesus' authority was clearly not limited to his bold words. For example, whatever he said at Capernaum, the liberation of the man with the unclean spirit stamped an exclamation point on it. His authority transcended not just the Hillels and Shammais of his times, therefore, *but even that of the demons!*

"Teaching them to observe all things brings into focus Jesus' priorities as well as his authority. In the Sermon on the Mount and its near twin, the Sermon on the Plain, we get one of our best glimpses of the "all things" he taught. And, not surprisingly, we see his persistent emphasis on the kingdom shining through again. What are his disciples to pray for? For the Father's kingdom to come, and his will to

be done on earth. And what does he enjoin them to seek above all? “Seek first the kingdom!”

### **The Great Commandment and the Great Commission**

The first mark of the kingdom is love, expressed by Jesus as love of God and neighbor. This was the sum and substance of his teaching. While the scribes and many of the Pharisees emphasized the details of the law, Jesus emphasized the priority of love. The upshot is that although the primacy of the Great Commission is key to understanding the work of the church, ultimately, it is not the first priority of the church. The first priority of the kingdom and, therefore, of the church is not making disciples but loving God and neighbor. Making disciples is an expression of love. If we forget that and reverse the order, putting the Great Commission first, our evangelism inevitably slips into manipulation and exploitation, and our church planting becomes all about filling seats and launching programs, not introducing our friends to our best friend, Jesus.

Unfortunately, that is where much of today’s church planting goes wrong. Too many are planting churches for the wrong reasons: for example, their frustration with existing churches; as a quick route to becoming a senior pastor (why not a serving pastor?): as a place to preach; or as a way to exercise an entrepreneurial bent. Similarly, too many are planting churches with the wrong focus—a focus on the church instead of the risen Christ.

Here is an example. These days, it is hard to find a book on church planting without a discussion somewhere of how to get ready for your first public worship service, called “the launch.” Usually, the launch involves great energy, and expense, and serves the church planting team in the way a grand opening is supposed to serve a business start-up, by drawing in new customers. The idea is that if you get 200 visitors to the launch and 100 of them return, at least you have a critical mass to go forward with.

But the obsession with a successful launch is supernumerary. It puts the church plant on the wrong path immediately. The New Testament emphasis is, rather, on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who came to show us the Father, who taught us how to live the kingdom life, who died to redeem us from our depravity, and who rose to reveal to us the victory of God over the powers of sin and death. Through the Holy Spirit, he has provided us with a launch already: with pyrotechnic tongues of fire, a Dolby rush of surround-sound wind, and simultaneous translation into at least 15 languages of one of the greatest sermons ever heard! When Rabbi Jesus rolled into town with his ragtag disciples, he had no need of a grand opening gala with free food, music, prizes, balloons, and giveaways.

He had no need for billboards, searchlights, or fireworks. There was no ribbon-cutting ceremony. Instead, there was announcement of good news for the poor, the imprisoned, the impaired, and the oppressed, and often, a live demonstration of that good news in action.

Rabbi Jesus' detractors followed him around and alleged he was a gormandizer and a schmoozer, eating and drinking his way from house to house—"Oy vey!" But wasn't that what all rabbis did when they came to town? They schlepped to the homes of hospitable friends and followers and reclined at table and talked Torah over tea and toast. It was their shtick! And they were good at it. They were *yiddishe kops*, and they knew every jot and tittle of their Bibles. What's more, they were fun to argue and debate with. And that was how you learned. So, why not "eating and drinking?" Maybe, instead of a launch, we need a lunch! We would do well to remember how important *koinonia* and table fellowship were in the life of the first century church.

### *Word and Deed*

Effective evangelism and disciple making requires a partnership of words and deeds. In fact, they can authentically be *loving* words and deeds in no other way! Practically speaking, when we engage in ministries of service, social programs, and deeds of kindness and compassion, without pointing to Jesus, we only point to ourselves. On the other hand, when we limit our evangelism and disciple making to words alone, what we say rings hollow.

The partnership of words and deeds is essential because God saves *whole persons*: body, soul, and spirit. It is no surprise at all, therefore, to see words and actions operating in tandem, as one cloth, in the ministry of Jesus. Thus, when John the Baptist sends messengers to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus answers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."<sup>26</sup>



*The Great Commission is for Everyone*

Another danger to avoid is thinking of the kingdom life as an evangelistic tour... or something missionaries do when they cross cultural boundaries. The Great Commission does not say anything about sending missionaries to Timbuktu, or even about sending them across the street. It says that, as they are going, even next door, all disciples are to engage in the task of making disciples. Wherever! Whenever! That is another reason, I think the initial adverb in the Great Commission is better rendered “going.”<sup>27</sup>

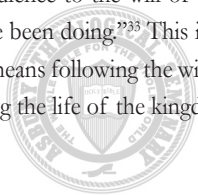
Kingdom living is missionary living. It is a mission of holy love from everywhere to everywhere, every day. It is also community living. Jesus’ commission is a plural one. It is not about the sending of individual missionaries, therefore; it is about the sending of the church. For that, and many other reasons, it is a good thing we are past the Colonial era and the missionary thinking of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Now, perhaps, we can have eyes to see that every local church is called to be a missional community. And every disciple is called to be a disciple maker.

*Imitating Jesus*

To accomplish that, two things are necessary. First, we need to imitate Christ. As Paul said to the Corinthians, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ.”<sup>28</sup> One of the Anabaptists, Hans Denck said, “No one can know Christ truly unless he follows him daily in life; and no one can follow him daily in life unless he knows him truly.”<sup>29</sup> That is our job: to take up our cross and follow Jesus daily in life. And this is how: by keeping in step with the Spirit and by doing what Jesus did.

So, what did Jesus do? Jesus said he did what he saw the Father doing and nothing on his own: “Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.”<sup>30</sup> The church consists of disciples who imitate the Son in his obedience to the Father, because they, too, have become children of God, and he is their father too. As John puts it, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”<sup>31</sup> How do we know that? In John’s words, “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”<sup>32</sup>

Having put our trust in Jesus, identifying with him as children of God, we mimic him in his perfect obedience to the will of the Father: “Whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing.”<sup>33</sup> This is key! In the Bible, faith equals faithfulness, and faithfulness means following the will of the Father and example of the Son—in other words, living the life of the kingdom.



*In the World*

As we have already noticed, it turns out that the kingdom life is a missionary life. Just as the Father sent the Son, so the Son sends his disciples into the world.<sup>34</sup> In Jesus' great prayer in John 17, he intercedes for his present and future disciples, which includes us. But there is one request he will not make. "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one," he says.<sup>35</sup>

**Metaphors of the Church in the World**

When Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses. He was not issuing a command; he was making a prediction. The church, by nature, would be a witnessing community. Virtually, all the New Testament metaphors for the church affirm that reality. They are never stated in the imperative, only in the indicative. In other words, the Scriptures don't say, "Be salt! Be light! Be witnesses!" Instead, we see that because we are the people of God—children who belong to him—we will inevitably, inescapably, automatically be salt, light, letters, fishers, good seed, ambassadors, stars in the night sky, sojourners, witnesses—all of us! Just as the Great Commission is in plural form, so the "you" attached to these metaphors is plural. Or as Ben Witherington is fond of saying, it is always "Y'all."

Think about the further implications of these metaphors for disciples. Salt has no impact without contact. Light is not light except in a dark place. Letters do not sit on desks, unsent. Ambassadors don't shut their doors and stay home. Fishers don't lock their boats in the boathouse. Sojourners don't settle down in a Thomas Kinkadee Cottage. No, they all go somewhere, do something. So, that is the second thing: (1) we need to live like Jesus; and (2) we need to do it *publically*, "in the world": "I pray not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." Every one of those word pictures of the church underscores that.

*On the Narrow Road*

Jesus describes kingdom living with another metaphor that clarifies what it means to live in the world as light and salt, yet without getting caught up in the ways and values of the world. He puts it in the form of a caution: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction... But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and few there be that find it."<sup>36</sup>

Why is the narrow road so hard to find and difficult to traverse? It is because it is not where you expect to find it. The narrow road is not some viney path that goes off into the wilderness. No, no. The narrow road goes right up the middle of

the broad road, only in just the opposite direction. Whereas once we were headed away from God, and away from the cross, and away from the light, we have now made a 180-degree turn (that is the meaning of repentance), and we are following the Lord Jesus and the saints of the ages on the road back to God and back to the light.

In other words, we are no longer living as the world lives. We have begun the journey to *perfection in love*, to Christlikeness, to all God intended us to be when he first thought of us. And, along the way, we tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love, the Jesus who rose from the dead, who has launched the kingdom of God, which, by grace, we are invited to enter through repentance and faith, and which we are privileged to serve if we will act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly in the footsteps of Jesus.

There will be two responses to us as we do. Some will be attracted by our lives and testimonies and will turn to follow us as we follow Jesus. But since we are pressing against the world's traffic heading the other way, we also create friction, which causes some to react with rancor. But was it not so for the prophets? And for the martyrs? And for our Lord?

Further, we live in a world that is inherently darker than the world we would like. Systemic evil, modern warfare, conspicuous consumption, industrial waste, air pollution, heartless hackers—they have all sullied us, and sullied us all. These days, so it seems, the mean are meaner, and the swindlers are shrewder. The rich are richer and the poor are poorer. However, in the midst of it all—literally so!—we are called to another way: the way of economic fair play; the way of reconciliation; the way of the care of God's earth; the way of lifting the poor from their poverty; the way of righteousness—the way of the kingdom of God.

How do we do that? Well, we do it with love and compassion, as Jesus did. We do it in the power of the Spirit. We do it by pointing to the unstoppable kingdom of God. We ask of people we meet on the way if they've heard of the freedom train. We say to them, "Why take a taxi to nowhere? Why take the road to destruction?" We point to the train: "This train is bound for glory!" we say. "Better jump on. There are no stops. For the freedom train is the kingdom train, and the engineer is the One who reigns—and reigns forever!"



## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The two are named in sequence among the apostles in Matthew 10:4. However, “zealot” need not have been a political label but just as likely could have been a descriptive one.

<sup>2</sup> John 11:45-53

<sup>3</sup> Judges 8:22-23

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 10:12-13

<sup>5</sup> 1 Chronicles 28:5

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jeremiah 10:21

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 17: 1, 16

<sup>8</sup> Daniel 2:37-38. Daniel clearly identified the Babylonian Empire as the first of the four kingdoms. From the first century until now, most interpreters have identified the others as the Achaemenid Empire (or First Persian Empire), the Macedonian (“Greek”) Empire, and the Roman Empire.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel 2:34-35

<sup>10</sup> Daniel 2:44-45

<sup>11</sup> Daniel 7:13-14

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 19:28

<sup>13</sup> Daniel 2:35

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 12:28

<sup>15</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 12:4-17

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 4:23; cf. 9:35

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 4:23-25

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 10:1-8

<sup>20</sup> Acts 1:6-8

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 24:14

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 28:16-20

<sup>23</sup> Philippians 2:9-11

<sup>24</sup> Mark 1:21-28





<sup>25</sup> Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 11:1-6; Luke 7:18-22

<sup>27</sup> I understand the argument that “Go” calls to mind Jesus’ sending of the Twelve and Seventy earlier in Matthew. But that, to me, is not a strong enough reason to create what amounts in English to a second imperative, which because of its position at the beginning of the commission, promotes it to greater prominence than the central imperative to “make disciples.”

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:1. Similar statements are common in the epistles.

<sup>29</sup> Denck, Hans, Walter Fellmann, and Edward J. Furcha. 1976. *Selected writings of Hans Denck*. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press.

<sup>30</sup> John 5:19

<sup>31</sup> 1 John 3:1

<sup>32</sup> John 1:12

<sup>33</sup> John 14:12

<sup>34</sup> John 20:21

<sup>35</sup> John 17:15

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 7:13-14

